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ABSTRACT

A program using cultural anthropology and ethnographic techniques to prepare teachers for positions in the small elementary and secondary schools characteristic of the mountain west and high plains is presented. As part of this program, a freshman level education requirement introduces students to the special character and positive aspects of rural teaching. This is followed by a sequentially structured series of sophomore field experiences which require students to use applied anthropology skills to observe and record information on rural communities and schools. After the field experience, a joint decision by the student and faculty is made as to whether to pursue rural teaching. Students selecting this option are assigned a rural advisor and exposed to additional rural environments during their final two years of training. In addition, students may elect to take courses in rural teaching methodology and rural community adjustment. The Montana Rural Education Center, a service arm of Western Montana College, offers inservice training, resource acquisition, legal counseling, and a variety of other services to rural teachers. An anthropologist on the department of education staff acts as a program development observer. (LP)

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TEACHER EDUCATION FOR RURAL SCHOOLS: THE WESTERN MONTANA COLLEGE MODEL

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April 1982

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TEACHER EDUCATION FOR RURAL SCHOOLS: THE WESTERN MONTANA COLLEGE MODEL

Western Montana College has finalized into catalog print a teacher education program designed to accommodate the special needs brought about by population sparsity and geographical isolation. The new program is based on three tenets that differ from traditional urban oriented preparation: (1) Sociocultural explanations are on equal par with psychology as the behavioral basis for all teacher education majors; (2) Rural field experiences and small school orientation are structured as a component requirement for all education majors; (3) An elective option in rural education is available which stresses the instructional, school system and community living alterations necessary to cope with rural teaching.

The Context:

The model is designed to prepare teachers for small elementary and secondary schools characteristic of the mountain west and high plains region. These rural schools are distinguished by a multi-variate configuration of features such as limited or no administration, multigrade classrooms, multiple preparations, few (if any) specialists, limited resources, and professional and social isolation. Schools within this configuration generally have less than 100 pupils and include the multigrade "county" school.

The communities in which such schools are located usually have but one or two outlets for groceries, gasoline and other necessities. Social community life for the teacher is highly visible.

Sociocultural Basis for Teacher Education:

Small communities constitute definite micro-social systems based on localized values and attitudes. Teachers who can accurately observe, interpret and accommodate to these environments are at an advantage. Therefore, cultural anthropology and ethographic techniques have been added to the preparation of all teachers, taught by an applied anthropologist on appointment with the Education Department. The courses are part of professional education.

Rural Field Experiences and Orientation:

Freshmen level "Introduction to Education" stresses the positive aspects of rural teaching and is the starting point of an Education Department responsibility to monitor all education majors. Sophomore field experiences are sequentially structured to utilize skills drawn from applied anthropology. Students must use these skills within rural settings to observe and record the school and community. After field experiences, final decisions are made by students/faculty on formal application to education. At the same time, decisions are made to pursue the rural option.

Rural Education Option:

Students selecting the rural option are assigned a rural advisor who helps the student select additional rural exposures during the last two years of preparation. Monitoring continues so that a complete profile is available for rural options so as to match graduates with specialized needs of different locales.

Two electives classes are available. One is specialized rural teaching methodology. The other, taken concurrent with student teaching, is a study of rural community adjustment using refined ethographic skills. A preliminary typology of rural schools and communities is available from which experiences and eventual placement may be selected.

Complimentary Functions:

The Montana Rural Education Center, a service arm of the College, has been in operation for three years. A full-time field coordinator travels to rural schools and arranges for in-service, resource acquisition, certification and legal counseling, data gathering, and brokering of services available from state department personnel and other agencies. A rural newsletter is published and an annual conference is organized for rural teachers. All of these functions provide feedback into the teacher education program.

One of the functions of the applied anthropologist is to act as a research facilitator and program development observer. Thus, someone with a non-education background questions the assumptions and procedures of the professional education staff.